

SILENCE AND ITS MANIFOLD CONNOTATIONS IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

Aparna Mandal

Assistant Professor, Naba Barrackpur Prafulla Chandra Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims at unearthing the myriad connotations of women's silence in selected short stories of Shashi Deshpande. Despite her refusal to identify herself as a feminist, Deshpande seeks to unravel the ways and the strategies that women often resort to in order to break free of the silence that patriarchy enjoins upon them. Speech is associated with power and silence with powerlessness within the binary epistemology of Western metaphysics. But recent theories have tried to dismantle this paradigm and have argued the empowering aspect of silence. Deshpande too uses a similar approach to investigate the ways in which women circumvent the power inflicting speech of patriarchy with a strategic silence.

KEYWORDS: *Silence, Speech, Patriarchy, Women*

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande has emerged as one of the most prolific writers in modern India whose writings revolve around the lives of women in myriad contexts but she categorically resists the term “feminist” because she finds the ideology of feminism to be quite limiting and which does not do proper justice to her engagement with the lives of women in her capacity as a writer. Her women characters are allowed moments of doubt and misgiving, remaining true to the prosaic material reality of everyday living. In her critical essay, ‘Writing from the Margin’, she enunciates her problems with feminism in greater detail. She is of the opinion that writers need to adopt a critical attitude towards feminism and asserts that she would prefer claiming the entire literary space rather fit into the little corner labelled ‘feminism’: Sometimes think that feminism has taken us out of the margin if it has done that only to deposit us into a ghetto This is a deeply frustrating experience for a writer. It denies us the place and dignity of being a writer who is speaking of human concerns; it diminishes the human value of our work. (Deshpande, 2003, b, p.162)

Deshpande both draws upon and critically departs from the indigenous and the Western paradigms of the feminist discourse and retains her liberty to portray her characters in the light of real life circumstances. One of the common themes in many of her short stories is silence. The dialectic that develops between speech and silence has significant connotations for the women who often resort to silence as a revolt against speech. Speech or language, as enunciated by the psychoanalyst JacquesLacan belongs to the symbolic order. When a child enters the complicated network of signs, rituals and roles that regulate society he/she enters into language itself. Examining the inherent bias in Lacan's theory of the ‘Symbolic Order’, Rosemarie Tong, an eminent feminist, concludes that the ‘Symbolic Order’ excludes women on account of their inadequacy to internalize the values of the dominant (in this case patriarchy) group:

On the one hand, we can conclude that women are *excluded* from the Symbolic Order, confined to the margins, left out in the cold, so to speak. On the other hand, we can conclude that women are *repressed* within the Symbolic Order, forced into it unwillingly. Because women are largely unable to internalize the “law of the father”, the law must be imposed from outside. Femininity is squelched, silenced, and straight jacketed because the only words that women are given are masculine words. (Tong, 1989, p.221)

The relegation of women to silence is true to most cultures, with the Indian society not being an exception. The myths of Sita and Draupadi can be examined as offering two diametrically opposite examples involving the dialectic between speech and silence within the Indian patriarchal context. The figure of Sita conjures the image of the self-effacing, ever-suffering wife who fits into the model of the ideal wife i.e. *pativrata*. Her idealization as the ultimate example of a dedicated wife obliterates all possibility of her protest against the wrongs meted out to her within a chronicle that hails Rama as the ideal man. Although Sita ultimately embraces death, it should not however be construed as her act of resignation. She uses silence as her weapon and turns it into a tool of protest against her lifelong victimization. Silence, in this context becomes empowering. Draupadi, on the other hand, is hailed as the ultimate symbol of active feminine resistance who raises her voice against the injustices of the patriarchal system and challenges an all-male assembly to answer her question in the disrobing scene of the *Mahabharata*. Her example offers a great temptation for appropriating her rebellious rhetoric for feminist agenda but one should take cognizance of the logic that it is her identity as the ‘chaste’ wife which rescues her from the ultimate humiliation of being publicly violated. Her speech might have struck a strong cord with feminists but it fails to have any political impact since the war which is ultimately fought is not meant to avenge her insult but to settle the long standing dispute between the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

Another celebrated example within the Indian context is the debate between the sage Yajnavalkya and Gargi. Gargi was a great woman scholar specializing in spiritual discourse. She was a ‘brahmavadinī’ i.e. an independent scholar in quest for truth. Though Yajnavalkya had offered the gift of knowledge to his wife Maitreyi, the same man spurned the queries of a free thinking woman. He had refused to answer Gargi’s questions after a certain point, “Then Vācāknvī [Gargi] fell silent” (Roebuck, 2000, p. 62). The silencing of Gargi by Yajnavalkya is the classic example of how patriarchy chooses the terms and conditions of women’s access to language. The man decides to withdraw from the debate thereby forcing the woman into an unwanted silence whereby she is no longer able to engage in the process of the generation of meaning.

The evolution of the Indian society also reflects the various stages through which women have been gradually pushed towards silence. Women scholars, who were known as Brahnavadinis, were common during Vedic times who were actively engaged in the cultivation of philosophical knowledge right up to 4th century B.C. These women were free thinkers and had an access to knowledge which felicitated an independent expression of thought. The lowering of the marriage age of girls to eight by Manu and the rise of the joint family system put checks on women’s pursuit of education and the free expression of thoughts. The authoritarian control of the male head of the family makes it almost impossible for the other members, especially women, to articulate their feelings. A new class of women known as the “Sadhyovahinis” came into existence, who were married and educated but were content within the circumscribed role within the joint family set up. Once married, girls were expected to spend their entire life span in their in-laws’ home no matter what the conditions were. No complaints were entertained and hence silence was their only resort.² (Mahindra, 1980, p. 92)

This training in silence was further reinforced by the cultural taboos imposed on several events and experiences, including physical ones such as marriage, motherhood and menstruation. Women are often debarred from expressing their true feelings vis-à-vis these experiences and the result is often a long silence. In her classic work on the discriminating nature of silence, Dale Spender has enunciated the way in which women have been marginalized within and by a system that has been propagated by men to promote their own interests. Consequently, women's meanings have been excluded from the linguistic register. Spender observes:

Any differences, any alternative names which women may have wanted to supply, have been 'disallowed' with the result that women and their experience have frequently been made invisible. There is a 'loud silence' when one searches for the meanings of women in language. (Spender, 1980, p. 54)

Shashi Deshpande's stories intervene to make a space for women so that this "loud silence" can at least be made audible. She attempts to create a framework that can accommodate the unspoken experiences of women. One of her early childhood experiences, as she mentions in her essay "Masks and Disguises", was that of being reprimanded for having written out her name in clear bold letters on gravel before a public building. It was only much later that she had realized the reason behind her chastisement. The realization dawned upon her while reading a passage in P.Lal's translation of the *Mahabharata*. On being questioned by Satyawat regarding how she manages to please all her husbands, Draupadi enumerates a list of things that she does but what catches Deshpande's attention is what she adds as an aside by saying 'Be silent about what you think.' (Deshpande, *Writing from the Margin*, 182) It is this lesson in silence, as Deshpande points out, which obliterates the entire history of women:

Be silent. There it is, the advice for all womankind, not just on 'how to please a husband', but on how to survive. This injunction of silence weighs down the entire history of women; in fact it explains the huge blank that is women's history. A huge blank, actually, in human history (Deshpande, 2003, b, p. 182)

Deshpande contends that silence need not necessarily be always a sign of disempowerment. It is to avoid falling in the trap of non-articulation that women authors have devised strategic "masks" and "disguises" to give expression to women's thoughts and feelings. The cultural association of women with silence in the Indian context can be ascribed to some extent to the Hindu cosmology where the patriarchal tradition traces its genealogy to one of the male heads of the Hindu pantheon i.e. Brahma. This association lends Indian patriarchy a kind of sanctity which makes it all more difficult for women to break free of the silence. Women therefore have to resort to non-violent means of breaking the silence.

It was with her story, "The Intrusion" (Deshpande, *Collected Stories*, Volume II, 2004, p. 200-209)³ that Shashi Deshpande discovered her "own authentic voice". (Deshpande, 2003, b, p. 147.) This story addresses one of the most commonly experienced problems faced by women who are thrown into arranged marriages and are left to the mercy of a complete stranger. The marital compulsion involves sexual surrender to a man which most often violates the personal integrity of the women, for very few men are known to be considerate enough to allow the amount of time and space that is necessary before the physical consummation of marriage. Deshpande clearly states that she is writing about a subject that is hardly ever spoken or written about:

Undoubtedly, the most difficult thing for a woman to talk about in public, to write about, is sex, specially their own sexual beings. But sex is as much part of women's lives, as troubling a part of their lives, as it is of men's; yet it had to remain both unspoken and unacknowledged. (Deshpande, 2003, b, p. 191)

The narrator feels uncomfortable in the company of the man to whom she has been newly married. She feels a tremendous sense of unease as she enters into the hotel room of their honeymoon resort. The very thought of entering into a physical relationship with an absolute stranger is intimidating to her. The sight of the bed, the sheets and the pillow fill her mind with extreme disgust because of their association with a reality that she hates to confront. She wishes to return to her parents' home and feels nostalgic. Hers was an arranged marriage where her opinion, let alone her consent, was never sought. Though she had tried to question her father, he had refused to entertain her doubts.

The narrator longs to visit the seaside in whose vicinity the resort is located and enjoy the simple pleasure of getting her feet wet in the waves of the sea but the reality check reminds her, 'But all this was in the future, possibly, if at all. And at present we were not friends, not acquaintances even, but only a husband and a wife' (CS1: 204). The question of a companionship hardly ever arises within an arranged marital set up. When she snubs his advances, he gets infuriated and asks for an explanation. She replies after a moment of hesitation, 'We [...] we scarcely know each other' (CS1: 207). She is scared of exposing the 'mysteries of my [her] body' (CS1: 207) to a complete stranger. She knew very well that despite her strong wish to be friends with him, 'He was all keyed up for a different experience and for him other things would come later' (CS1: 207).

As the narrator falls asleep, she dreams of the sea flowing over her body but the reality turns out to be different. She is brutally shaken out of sleep by the act of her husband's forceful intrusion:

There was no talk, no word between us—just his relentless pounding. . . . I could have borne the battering of the sea better, for that would hurt, but not humiliation like this. (CS1: 208)

The encounter between speech and silence is enacted upon the body of the female. If the female body is the blank text, then the act of male intrusion amounts to a phallic scribbling. The strangeness between the newly married couple is a quintessential feature of most Indian arranged marriages. Cruel action replaces communication and its casualty is the woman. When action circumvents words, it is bound to be ruthless and violent.

The narrator's sense of indignation is clearly expressed in these words: 'And the cry I gave was not for the physical pain, but for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself' (CS1: 208-209). The woman's attempt at articulation gets defeated by the supremacy of the male as he resorts to an act of imposing his physical superiority over her. The prowess of the male body pushes the woman into an abyss of silence. The anonymous narrator of Deshpande's story represents the predicament of most Indian women whose are denied self-expression in similarly oppressive conjugal arrangements. Deshpande speaks of breaking free both as a woman and as a writer by giving voice to a grave but little articulated issue:

With this story I think I freed myself, both as a woman and as a writer. Liberated and, yes, strengthened too, for to disown some part of yourself is to weaken yourself. (Deshpande, 2003, b, p. 192)

In another story titled "Lucid Moments" (CS2: 20-30), Deshpande emphasizes upon the need of preserving the identity and history of women which often get obliterated from the collective records of the past. The narrator is a woman

called Sujata who finds herself in a difficult situation as she sees her dying mother babble in a state of mental delirium, seeking to know the name of her mother who is no more. She strains to speak and utters broken sentences, asking her daughter for her mother's name: "My mother [...] I never [...] never knew [...]" (CS2: 21). She seems to be desperate to bridge the gap that leaves her with a sense of emptiness arising out of being alienated from her past. Sujata is able to resurrect meaning out of the broken words spoken by her mother. This exceptional bonding between the mother and daughter provides the clue to the appropriateness of the title "Lucid Moments" "as the half articulate moments get perfectly understood. This subverts the importance of words as the sole medium of communication. Her mother, whom she calls Akka, speaks of the non-inclusion of her own mother's name in the pre-wedding rituals. She jumbles, ' "My mother's name [...] why don't they [...]" ' (CS2: 25). As her mother sinks into her final sleep, Sujata is left perturbed by her mother's dying wish. She hopes to fulfil it and takes a step towards that direction by hanging a framed photograph of her dead mother. In an attempt to reclaim the lost history of women in general and of her mother in particular, she declares to her niece ' "She is your grandmother" . . . "Her name was Sumati" ' (CS2: 30). Sujata ensures that the succeeding generations do not suffer from the same crisis of identity which had plagued her mother on account of the non-availability of her mother's name. This story charts the effort of the protagonist Sujata towards the negation of silence and reclaiming the forgotten history of the women who have hitherto been relegated to silence.

In her story titled "Lost Springs" (CS2: 70-80), Deshpande deals with the reason behind the sudden unexplained demise of her long suffering mother. There had been a speculation that she had died by drowning but nothing much was ever spoken about it. During one of her holidays, the narrator has a morbid dream of her mother's dead body floating in the hotel swimming pool. As she reminisces about her mother, she has the vision of her sobbing in a dark room to which she was confined most of the times due to her infirmity. There was a huge gap between her and her children since they never went inside that room. The shadowy figure begins to take on a concrete presence when she hears her mother's voice for the first time. She emerges as something more than 'a shapeless hump in a dark room' (CS2:74). The narrator's life undergoes a sea change with the arrival of a teenager girl who is a distant relative. She forges a very strong bonding with this girl until one incident belies her expectations and leaves her with a deep sense of betrayal. She takes sides with her brothers and pokes fun at her inability to swim. Her father also joins in this vulgar water sport. The men enjoy the game of chasing her in water without having any regard for the hurt emotions of Sujata. Out of a sense of betrayal, she complains to her mother about how her brothers and her father were sporting with the young girl under the water. On hearing this, her mother however had remained silent. The narrator's disappointment at her mother's lack of response is evident when she says:

I waited, I remember, for my mother to sympathize with me, to comfort me, but there was only silence. Even in the closed room we could hear the voices from the river, faint, but unmistakably voice of revelers. (CS2: 78)

She had understood what Sujata could not. What they were doing was much more than just playing; it amounted to an orgy. Sujata's mother was perhaps pushed to commit the extreme act of suicide after this. The very silence, which was then incomprehensible, now becomes loaded with meaning. Words had failed to convey the pain and the sense of betrayal that her mother must have felt then. Her silence speaks to her daughter after a considerable gap of time to unravel the mystery surrounding her death.

"I want" (CS2: 143-150) chronicles the story of a young unmarried girl named Alka and her unfulfilled wants. She has had to go through several rounds of self-exhibition as an essential prelude to arranged marriage where she has been

subjected to ‘insolent stares’ (CS2:144) and the ‘impertinent questions’ (CS2:144-45) of absolute strangers. During one such round, the prospective groom bombards her with a litany of his wants. Being annoyed at his harangue, Alka ponders about the total disregard shown by the man towards her feelings:

I want [...] I want [...] I want [...] What about me? My silence was such a loud cry of indignation, I was surprised he couldn’t hear me. . . . What would I tell him if he said, ‘What do you want?’ My desires were so elementary compared to his that I was ashamed of them. A man, a husband, a good companion, a good marriage, children That was all. But I need not have worried. He didn’t ask me. Not once. (CS2: 148)

Alka’s situation is indicative of women’s predicament in general where most often than not, they find it difficult to articulate their feelings or rather make themselves heard and are pushed into an ever pervasive silence. Wishing to counter her lot, Alka confronts her father by asking “You did not ask me?..Didn’t you think I had something to say? It’s my life, isn’t it?” (CS2: 149). Her father replies nonchalantly, “I’ve made enquiries. I haven’t been hasty or careless. He’s decent. No bad habits, a good career, a good family. What more do you want?” (CS2: 149). At last she has been asked about her want but the framing of the question is such that it forestalls any expression of her desire by laying out in no unsure terms that there is nothing to want. Alka finds it difficult to give voice to her wants:

At last someone was asking me. What could I say? . . . My own wants began to dwindle. They were too insubstantial. I should have said, ‘A man with a four-figure salary. A man with a car’ They would have understood. Now, if I said, ‘A man who hears my voice when I speak. Who understands me even when I don’t’, they would call me crazy. (CS2: 149)

Alka wants to get married to someone who can hear her silence—something which sounds paradoxical within the rational frame of reference. The ideological structure of patriarchy is built upon the foundation of reason which privileges words/voice over silence. Silence can however be studied in alternative ways as pointed out by Marie Ritchie Key:

In a linguistic sense, patterns of silence figure in language structures and must be dealt with in the analysis of language. . . . This kind of silence must be distinguished from nothingness, or moments when nothing is happening. Silence is part of language and is as important as sound to communication and thought. (Key, 1975, p. 127)

Having arrived at an understanding of the operation of forces which force her into an involuntary compliance, Alka says:

His voice was more confident now. He knows, I thought. He’s always known. I dare not refuse. Why had I imagined the choice was mine? It had never been mine. I surrendered my illusions and embraced reality. ‘Yes’, I said. ‘It’s all right.’ (CS2: 150)

Alka is finally forced to accept the truth that patriarchal logic does not offer any scope for contestation. Her fate is thereby sealed like many other women whose silence gets misconstrued as submission.

Shashi Deshpande has attempted to offer multiple interpretations surrounding the silence of women in different situations. She subtly tries to capture the fine line that differentiates between silence as compliance and silence as resistance. In the stories examined above, the women characters are often pushed into disempowering situations which aim at throttling their voices but they devise their unique forms of resistance where silence ceases to be an index of powerlessness.

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